THE TALKING BRASS HEAD AS A SYMBOL OF DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE IN *FRIAR BACON* AND IN *ALPHONSUS, KING OF ARAGON*

Though Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* has traditionally been discussed in terms of its status as the first romantic comedy,[1] literary critics have recently begun to turn their attention to the way that the play's action and plot serve as social commentary. Taking their cue from William Empson's seminal observation that, in *Friar Bacon,* 'the power of beauty is like the power of magic; both are individualist, dangerous, and outside the social order', these critics have focused on the general, metaphorical links between love and magic.[2] It is important to recognize, however, that the friar's magic in this play is more than a general metaphor for human ambition or emotion; Greene's depiction of the brass[3] head that Bacon creates and attempts to animate by way of his occult knowledge during the course of the play is a specific lampoon of the scientists and science of his day.

My discussion in this essay will center on how Bacon's automaton descends from a tradition of oracular heads, which serve as symbols of mysterious knowledge, and how, in Greene's play, the talking metal head that Friar Bacon creates is an emblem of popular suspicion toward the practitioners of innovative science. I shall also touch briefly on how Greene first makes use of this emblematic tradition of the artificially-made, talking head in an early play, *Alphonsus, King of Aragon.*

The talking brass heads in Greene's plays are descendants of two ancient traditions that became intermingled during the Middle Ages. The first of these traditions originated with the automata created by the gods in Greek myth and with the animated idols that were supposedly built by the ancient Egyptians. Indeed, dreams of artificial servants are far older than our cybernetic age, or even than the Industrial Age. Homer talks in Book 18 of the *Iliad* about female au-

[1] See, for example, Alan S. Downer, *The British Drama: A Handbook and Brief Chronicle* (New York, 1950), pp. 89-94; and Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, *A Short View of Elizabethan Drama* (New York, 1943), p. 71.

[2] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935, repr. 1960), p. 31; Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia, MO., 1984), pp. 67-87; A.R. Braunmuller, '"Second Means": Agent and Accessory in Elizabethan Drama', in *The Elizabethan Theatre XI: Papers Given at the Eleventh International Conference on Elizabethan Theatre Held at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, in July 1985,* eds. A.L. Magnusson and C.E. McGee (Ontario, 1990), p. 195; Charles W. Crupi, *Robert Greene* (Boston, 1986), pp. 116-29.

[3] Because the metal that we know as brass (copper and zinc) was not invented until the eighteenth century, the words 'bronze' and 'brass' were used interchangeably in the sixteenth century to refer to the alloy made of copper and tin; I shall likewise use these terms interchangeably.

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tomata, fashioned by Hephaistos out of gold, which served as that god's attendants. Also, in the same Book, he mentions Hephaistos's forging of twenty self-moving tripods that would serve the gods at their assemblies. It is to these tripods, as well as to the moving statues of Daedalus, that Aristotle later refers when, in Book 1, chapter 4 of his *Politics*, he muses about the possibility of a 'tool [that] could follow orders, or could itself perceive in advance what is needed and so could complete its work by itself' (1253b).

There are also widespread legends that the Egyptians could build mobile statues. These statues of the gods could supposedly walk and talk, and they were considered examples of the marvellous power and special knowledge of the priestly class.[4] A possible connection between these classical legends regarding wise men's automata and similar legends that arise in medieval Europe is the figure of Virgil. Many popular stories had arisen by the Middle Ages that this Roman poet had created mechanical marvels, such as a group of statues, called *Salvacio Romae*, that would automatically ring bells to warn Rome of the revolt of one of its provinces. These popular legends eventually made their way into written form in the work of such thirteenth-century figures as Alexander Neckham.[5]

Similar to such legends are medieval traditions about human automata made by philosophers of the time. William of Malmesbury, for example, writes in chapter 10 of his chronicles of a talking head devised by the tenth-century natural philosopher and theologian Gerbert of Aurillac (who eventually became Pope Sylvester II), and John Gower, in book 4 of his *Confessio Amantis*, tells of a talking bronze head made by medieval cleric and philosopher Robert Grosseteste.[6] There are also popular tales from the age that Albertus Magnus was responsible for creating a life-sized, humanoid automaton.[7]

The other tradition that has a bearing on our consideration of the meaning of Bacon's brass head is that of using severed human heads for purposes of divination. Though stories of severed, talking heads (like that of the green knight in the Gawain legend) can be found in the myths of nearly all cultures, the use of such heads to reveal hidden knowledge is most common in ancient tales from

[4] John Cohen, *Human Robots in Myth and Science* (New York, 1967), pp. 19-20.

[5] The legend of these moving statues of Virgil's are mentioned by Neckham in book 6 of his *De natura rerum*, as well as by Vincent of Beauvais and by the anonymous author of the thirteenth-century work, *Mirabilia Romae*; moreover, this tradition of Virgil as miracle-worker and magician carried through the sixteenth century and is rendered in an anonymous prose romance of the period called *The Lyfe of Virgilius*, in *Early English Prose Romances*, ed. William J. Thoms, 2nd ed. (London, 1858; New York: AMS, 1970), II, 1-62 (esp. pp. 7-8 and 37-8); I am indebted to this work and its editor for much of my information on the Virgil legend. See also D.P.A. Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, trans. E.F.M. Benecke (London, 1895).

[6] *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*, ed. J. A. Giles (London: 1847), p. 181; John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1899-1902, repr. 1968), II, 307-8 (lines 234-43).

[7] Joachim Sighart, *Albert the Great, of the Order of Friar-Preachers: His Life and Scholastic Labours* (London, 1876, repr. 1974) 127. See also Martin Delrio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Louvain, 1600) I, iiii, pp. 70-72; this Renaissance text mentions Albertus's possession of a talking metal head, rather than a complete, human-sized automaton.

the Middle East.[8] With the exception of the tale of Orpheus, whose head acts as an oracle for those on Lesbos and utters a 'riddling prophecy for the benefit of the elder Cyrus',[9] the oldest tales of oracular heads may be those concerning the Biblical *teraphim*. These oracular figures, mentioned in the book of Ezekiel and elsewhere, were thought by some Biblical scholars to originally have been mummified human heads 'with a thin plate of gold, inscribed with incantations, beneath the tongue'.[10] The stories of these early prophetic heads are often associated with evil, or with the grotesque. Another tale from the Levant, for instance, written in the eighth century by Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre, involves the decapitation of a young scholar so that his head might be made into an oracle; and in the tenth-century Arabic work, *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadim tells of the preservation of a human head for later use in divination.[11]

Myths of using severed human heads as oracles seem to have travelled from East to West, reaching Europe from Arabic lands sometime in the early Middle Ages, perhaps via the Crusaders. One piece of evidence supporting this sort of connection is a legend concerning a thirteenth century English crusader at Acre who wants to find out what is happening back in his own country. He employs 'a young man who had learned magic [from] the Saracens' to exhume and question a human skull, which tells him of the war between Henry III and a group of barons.[12]

Thus, there are two notable things about the legends of the *artificial*, oracular head, as they first appear in medieval Europe: first, they seem to be a European hybrid of Arabic tales about talking, *human* heads and the older stories about talking statues;[13] second, these medieval tales are chiefly associated with some of the more innovative European natural philosophers of the time. These philosophers include six men who are directly or indirectly associated in popular legend with the construction of automata: Gerbert of Aurillac, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, William of Auvergne, Robert Grosseteste, and Roger Bacon.

The legends of these philosophers' possession of wondrous automata may be influenced by common connections between magic and science in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era. Indeed, many of the philosophers mentioned above had close contact with knowledge of the occult sciences adapted from Moslem sources and from classical sources recovered through the Moslems. Gerbert had evidently studied in Moslem Spain, and the rest of these philosophers, in their work, gave credence to at least some occult ideas. Indeed, as

[8] This information about talking heads, and that which follows, is from George Lyman Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, MA, 1916), pp. 147-94; and Arthur Dickson, *Valentine and Orson: A Study in Late Medieval Romance* (New York, 1929), 190-216. Both of these works provide extensive listings of ancient and early modern sources for the legend of the disembodied, talking head.

[9] *A Study of Gawain*, p. 184.

[10] Ezek. xxi.21; *Human Robots*, p. 19; see also James Hastings, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1905) IV, p. 718; and *Valentine and Orson*, pp. 203-4.

[11] *Valentine and Orson*, p. 204.

[12] *ibid.* p. 202.

[13] *ibid.* p. 206

Brian Copenhaver points out, Albertus, Aquinas, and William actively 'acknowledged and defended principles of occultism' in their writing because they found that 'the elements of the magical worldview were common ideas well respected by ancient philosophers'; thus, they developed a 'conviction ... that the *magus* and the philosopher used much the same conceptual lexicon'.[14] Even Bacon, despite his condemnation of magic in such works as his treatise, *On the Nullity of Magic* (*De nullitate magiae*), endorsed the occult sciences of astrology and alchemy, and his denunciation of magic only extended so far:

> The incantations and characters, the fascination and marvellous transformations of magic Bacon condemns, but he does not condemn all incantations and characters, nor disbelieve in marvellous transformations and fascination.[15]

Another factor that probably contributed to the legends regarding the artificial creations of these men was that some of them, such as Gerbert of Aurillac, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus, had interests in, and perhaps built, mechanical contrivances, and this fact may have contributed to tales of their creating artificial, speaking heads. In *De nullitate magiae*, for example, Bacon writes of some amazing mechanical devices that he is familiar with, including a flying machine, and chariots and ships that are able to move without the normal means of propulsion.[16] And William of Malmesbury maintains that Gerbert not only had interest in similar contraptions, but that he actually built a mechanical clock and a church organ powered by steam.[17] As already noted, tales about the creation of artificial, oracular heads grew around both Bacon and Gerbert, and legends about Albertus mention his fashioning of a complete automaton that could answer questions. All of these tales end in rather violent, frightening ways. Gerbert's head predicts his death, Bacon's is destroyed by his own error, and Albertus's automaton is smashed by a terrified pupil.

There are several possible reasons for the macabre form of these tales. First, medieval culture was, as is commonly known, extremely hierarchical and rigidly orthodox. Yet the brilliant men around whom these stories arose tinkered with some unorthodox concepts. Besides the fact that they had an interest in, and perhaps built, novel mechanical devices, these philosophers all worked with

[14] Brian P. Copenhaver, 'Astrology and Magic', *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1988), p. 266. The relevant works are Albertus's *De mineralibus*, Aquinas's *De occultis operibus naturae*, and William of Auvergne's *De universo*.

[15] Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York, 1923-58) II, pp. 658 and 664.

[16] Bacon discusses these devices in chapters IV and V of this treatise, a modern translation of which is available in *Roger Bacon's Letter Concerning the Marvellous Power of Art and of Nature and Concerning the Nullity of Magic*, trans. Tenney L. Davis (Easton, PA, 1923; repr. 1993); a fairly complete translation of these chapters of Bacon's work is also included in the anonymously-written Elizabethan prose romance called *The Famous Historie of Fryar Bacon*, in Thoms, ed., vol. 1; see especially p. 213 for Bacon's description of the flying machine, and such.

[17] *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, p. 175.